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## The Child Victims of the Aceh Tsunami: Stories of Resilience, Coping and Moving on with Life

Maila Dinia Husni Rahiem<sup>a\*</sup> Steven Eric Krauss<sup>b</sup>, Husni Rahim<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta*

<sup>b</sup>*Universiti Putra Malaysia*

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### Abstract

**Abstract:** Disasters, regardless of the type or scale, have the potential to cause distress, or even severe distress. Children are usually the most affected by disaster, due to their physical, psychological and social vulnerabilities. Children are also the most vulnerable to face post-disaster challenges from psychological stress due to the limited availability of special care, protection and support. In this study, we explore the experiences of Acehese children survivors of the 2004 tsunami. We set out to understand how these young people survived the tsunami, coped with the aftermath, and progressed with their lives following the tragedy. Our focus was on uncovering the multitude of trajectories, or pathways, that comprise the collective experiences of young people's post-disaster lives. We employed a narrative, qualitative research approach, and conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-seven survivors. By giving a voice to their lives, we aimed to capture the successes and challenges that these young people face in attempting to live normal lives following a major disaster. At the time of the study, the participants had either lost one or both parents because of the tsunami. All of the respondents are now teenagers or young adults between the ages of 17 to 24 years old.

The findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that all of the survivors have both shared and unique experiences. They all stated that in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, they felt that there was a dearth of people to talk to and discuss their feelings. They also still feel the sadness, horror and trauma of the tsunami, yet they often keep their feelings to themselves. Lastly, they all accept the tragedy as their destiny from God. A variety of responses show differences in how they see their future. Some are very optimistic and still believe that they have a role in society, while others are confused, jobless and lost, to the extent that they feel uncertainty as to where their next meal will come from. The survivors also explained about the different types of support that they received immediately after the disaster including continuation support, long term support, and current support. How the young survivors coped with the immediate aftermath of the tsunami depended on the support received from their communities and the extent of their own inner strength and will to survive. Combined, these internal and external resources formed a personal resilience in surviving the tsunami, both in the short and long term.

By studying the children of Aceh, aid workers, and support agencies -- especially those that work in the field of mental health/psychosocial programs -- can learn better ways to assist, help, and support children following natural disasters. Moreover, by understanding the children's sources of resilience, we will be better informed about how families and schools should prepare and teach children, so that the victims are able to cope better with major disasters.

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### 1. Introduction

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\* Corresponding author. Phone: +62-878-977-93337; fax: +62-21-744-3917  
E-mail address: [mailadinia@uinjkt.ac.id](mailto:mailadinia@uinjkt.ac.id)

When disasters happen, children are among the most vulnerable members of the community (Balaban, 2006). They are at a higher risk of distress and trauma in comparison to adults (Ronan & Johnston, 2005). Children are physically vulnerable, and invariably many disaster victims are children. They are more susceptible to death, injury and abuse. They are also psychologically vulnerable and may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other related symptoms (Peek, 2008), for example depression, anxiety disorders, and behavioral disorders (Balaban, 2006).

Children react to potential danger (Greenberg, Carr & Summers, 2002), they are not passive beings, and therefore, their feelings and thoughts concerning a disaster need to be understood. They respond to fear, have a fight or flight reaction, and also develop their own adaptive mechanism for survival (*ibid*). Humans, from an early age, develop a sense of their own agency in their adaptation and attendant rewards (Masten et al. 2006b), so it is important to carefully consider the experience of children (Peek, 2008).

In this study, we examine the experiences of Acehnese children who survived the 2004 tsunami. We investigate how these young people have dealt with the situation in the aftermath of the tsunami, and progressed with their lives following the tragedy. The researchers believe that by collecting the stories of their personal experiences, we will gain a unique insight to enable a better understanding from the survivors' perspectives, of what is required to help support children in the aftermath of a disaster. It is important that support services' provisions for victims should take into consideration the victims' interpretation of what has happened, is happening, and might happen, so that the support will match the needs of the people (Rahiem, Abdullah, & Krauss, 2017).

In this study, we applied a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is a methodology used to study experience in the form of narratives, or stories, and is therefore a way of capturing and analyzing human experiences. The use of narrative inquiry is to adopt a particular view of experience as a phenomenon under study (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry begins with a respect for lived experience, as it explores both individual as well as the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which those experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (Lessard, Caine and Clandinin, 2015).

Narrative inquiry was used to capture and analyze the human experience of those surviving the disaster, namely, the 2004 Aceh Tsunami. We completed in-depth interviews with twenty-seven survivors. They had all either lost one or both parents as a result of the tsunami. All of the respondents are now teenagers or young adults between the ages of 17 to 24 years old, they were aged 6-12 years old at the time of disaster. The participants are from two districts in the Banda Aceh regency, namely Kuta Raja and Syah Kuala, and from four districts in the Aceh Besar regency, Lhoknga, Seulimeum, Darussalam, and Baitussalam. In the interview we asked the respondents to share their experience of living through the tsunami. Narratives focused on: 1) how they coped with the aftermath of the disaster; and 2) how their lives are at the present day.

Following the interviews, the researchers used reflexive journals to write memos on salient issues that emerged from the interviews (Fontana and Frey, 2003) and debrief. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Some parts that we used as quotes were translated using vernacular English by a native speaker. Study participants were asked to check and edit the content of their transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researchers undertook analysis separately and then together in order to capture as full an analysis as possible (Mafile'o and Kaise Api, 2009). The transcripts were analyzed for themes emerging from the stories related to the research objectives, so that categories of analysis 'emerge from each story text itself, rather than being set from the beginning, as in quantitative studies' (McCracken, 1988 cited in Atkinson, 1998: 59). This is also in line with a narrative strategy; wherein attention is given to the complexity within each narrative, and then across narratives (Chase, 2005; Mafile'o and Kaise Api, 2009).

## 1. Theory/Calculation

Children are capable of overcoming adversity, of meeting life challenges (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1979). This research showed that the children survived in various ways, which resulted in different problems connected with facing the aftermath of the tsunami. They used their inner strength, family, and community in dealing with the situation. All of the respondents have lost one or both of their parents, yet they still have their own capacity to survive.

In this study, we explored further through the eyes of the child victims; how they survived the adversity and how their lives are now. We looked at what factors have brought them to the point they are now. The capacity and capability to survive is how we view resilience. The theory of resilience is the underpinning theory of this research, to explain and explore how children survive, cope, and succeed in traumatic events. Masten et al. (2008) defined resilience as a process of, capacity for, or outcome of the successful adaptation in challenging or threatening circumstances.

Most children and young people are resilient, but also vulnerable to the psychosocial effects of disasters (Richard et al., 2008). Most children will be traumatized and distressed after a disaster, until they gain a sense of safety from the close people around them. As humans, we are social beings and our adaptive functioning is embedded in complex interdependent relationships and social systems (Masten, 2008). These relationships with others play a key role in promoting resilience and these social systems enable us to adapt to the situation around us (*ibid*). Support for children from close bonds such as parents, families or friends is important in overcoming hard times (Prinstein et al., 2010). Children who face chronic adversity might recover better when they have a positive relationship with a competent adult (Masten et al., 2008). Resilience rests in relationships; for young children, resilience depends primarily on the quality of relationships with parental figures (Luthar, 2006). If children lose one or both

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